Not just for numbers: Anchoring biases decisions involving sight, sound, and touch

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Numeric anchoring is a long-established technique of marketing communication. Once a price is mentioned, that number serves as the basis for—or "anchors"—all future discussions and decisions. But new research shows that this phenomenon is not limited to decisions that involve numbers, the use and understanding of which require high-level cognitive thinking. Anchoring also biases judgments at relatively low

levels of cognition when no numbers are involved.

In research recently published in the *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, Gaurav Jain, an assistant professor in the Lally School of Management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, demonstrated that anchoring even occurs in perceptual domains, like sight, sound, and touch.

To test his novel theory that anchoring could happen without numbers as the starting point, Jain conducted several studies involving different senses. For example, to test decision-making relating to haptics—or touch—he asked subjects to close their eyes and touch sandpaper of a certain grit. When the subjects opened their eyes, he offered them 16 sandpaper choices and asked them to find the grit that matched the first one.

Jain anchored the range of options by making participants start with either a relatively finer or coarser grit than the initial one. Those subjects that were anchored with the finer grit chose sandpaper that was finer than the one they originally touched—and the converse was true for those anchored with the coarser grit.

"My findings offer marketing professionals another fundamental tool to guide consumer behavior by anchoring a product or message through their senses," Jain said.Additionally, Jain's research offers critical insight into the underpinnings of the phenomenon of anchoring.

Even in academic circles, questions remain about how decisions are made and the role anchors play. Do people go from the anchor point to their final decision in one move? Or do they take incremental steps away from the anchor?

Jain's experiments gave him the opportunity to watch the decision-

making process in action, leading to a conclusion that reconciles these two models. He found that his subjects reached their final decision by taking small jumps away from the anchor point, but each of those jumps were influenced by the anchor's placement.

"Discovering exactly how we humans make decisions has been nearly impossible," Jain said. "With this research, I found an opening into the black box of the human brain. I've shown how decision-making works in the perceptual domains, and it signals directly how it may work in numerical domains."

More information: Gaurav Jain et al, Perceptual anchoring and adjustment, *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* (2021). DOI: 10.1002/bdm.2231

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